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Trends in the Enlisted Reserve

The call-up of over 240,000 reservists for the Persian Gulf War marked the largest mobilization of the reserves since the Korean War. Although largely successful, the call-up spawned a number of concerns. First, some units had to delay deployment because of low levels of skill qualification. Some senior officials, noting these readiness problems, worry about the ability of the reserves to attract sufficient numbers of experienced personnel. That concern is reflected in a congressional direction to the Army National Guard to boost the number of prior-service personnel in its ranks. Another concern is that such a large call-up could cause recruiting problems or foster a mass exodus. The drawdown of active and reserve forces has served only to intensify these worries. National Defense Research Institute researchers Richard Buddin and Sheila Kirby address these and other concerns in *Enlisted Personnel Trends in the Selected Reserve, 1986-1994*.

HOW ARE THE RESERVES DOING?

Drawing on an extensive analysis of trends in personnel indicators for active and reserve personnel from FY86 to FY94, Buddin and Kirby show that:

- With respect to prior-service personnel, the reserves
 - have been successful at attracting them,
 - have been doing better at holding onto them,
 - have been doing a better job at matching the prior-service skill with the reserve assignment.
- ODS has not adversely affected the reserves' ability to recruit or retain people.

But

- Attrition among those who have joined without military experience appears to be increasing.

RECRUITING AND RETENTION TRENDS

The reserves are not having difficulty attracting experienced people to join their ranks. Examining the willing-

ness of two groups—junior personnel with between 2 and 6 years experience and more-senior people with 7 to 12 years—to join the reserves, Buddin and Kirby find that the reserves are continuing to attract prior-service personnel at a stable rate. The drawdown of the active forces has put more people in the recruiting pool, which means that the reserves are attracting larger numbers, even though the rate is constant.

But attracting experienced people is only part of the problem. If the reserves do not retain those they attract, they do not get much benefit from them. Although attrition of first-year recruits varies by component, the reserves are succeeding in this area as well. The spread of losses varies considerably, with the Air National Guard losing only 6 percent of its first-year junior recruits and the Army Reserve losing 37 percent. But the trend of attrition across all components is down, substantially so in some cases. For example, loss rates among junior personnel in the Army National Guard have dropped 11 percentage points since FY86.

MATCHING SKILLS

The advantage of recruiting people with prior military experience is that they increase the overall experience level of the reserves and reduce the training requirements. The greatest benefit occurs if people are assigned in the same skill position they held in the active force. Trends here are also encouraging. All components have improved their job-match rates except the Army National Guard, where the rate has held constant. Even there, the Guard has held a relatively high match rate constant while absorbing large numbers of prior-service personnel from the active force drawdown.

ATTRITION TRENDS

Nor does Operation Desert Storm seem to have caused reservists to rethink their commitment. Overall departures have remained constant over the eight-year period, averaging slightly over 21 percent for the force as a whole. But overall attrition is not the only important indicator. It is also important to look beneath the surface to

determine how different groups are behaving, because this provides a better indication of future trends. Buddin and Kirby distinguish between those who enter the reserves with no prior military experience and those who join with either active or reserve experience. Charting behavior based on year of entry, they find that those with prior military experience show no change in the rate at which they leave. However, those with no experience who have recently joined appear to be leaving at an increased rate. Buddin and Kirby caution that these data may not show anything about the propensity of this group to remain in the reserves. It might be that the reserves are concentrating on retaining those with prior service.

SKILL QUALIFICATION

Although the Selected Reserve components have been doing better at matching the skills of prior-service personnel with reserve jobs, skill qualification remains a stubborn problem, particularly for the Army components. Job and unit turbulence is the primary reason for the low qualification rates. The Army components have improved their rates by only about 2 to 3 percentage points since the end of the Cold War, and about 30 percent of the personnel are not qualified in their assigned duty.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of recent personnel indicators suggests that the Selected Reserve components have improved in a number of respects. They are fielding a senior, experienced, and high-quality enlisted force. They have been successful at increasing their prior-service content, although this increase results from a larger pool of assets as a result of the drawdown rather than an increased rate of joining. The reserves have markedly increased their job-match rates for new prior-service gains, and the attrition rates of the gains have also declined. Skill qualification remains stable, and turbulence shows modest improvement.

That said, there are some concerns. Attrition for those without prior service has increased. This increase may result from a conscious selection policy, as units choose to retain the more qualified prior-service people as the force shrinks. If not, this trend bears watching as retirements increase and the reserves take in more people without military experience. Skill qualification remains a problem, and reducing job turbulence both within and across units will require systemic reforms.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute; it is documented in Enlisted Personnel Trends in the Selected Reserve, 1986-1994: An Executive Summary, by Sheila Nataraj Kirby and Richard Buddin, MR-681/1-OSD, 1996, 43 pp., \$7.50, ISBN: 0-8330-2365-9, and Enlisted Personnel Trends in the Selected Reserve, 1986-1994, by Richard Buddin and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, MR-681/2-OSD, 1996, 140 pp., \$15.00, ISBN 0-8330-2366-7, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by National Book Network. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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